

Montagnard Rebellion Was Suspected

Viet Marines Disarm Tribesmen

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SAIGON, Sept. 12--South Vietnamese marines have disarmed nearly 400 Montagnard tribesmen in the central highlands, it was learned tonight.

It was an attempt to head off a rebellion like the Montagnards' brief but serious revolt a year ago to push for recognition of their separate identity.

Details of the Friday and Saturday operation were sketchy here, but it was believed the disarmed Montagnards were among two or three strike force units led by American Special Forces personnel.

U.S. spokesmen were reluctant to comment on this development because the U.S. Mission is so suspect for its alleged interference in Montagnard affairs that Saigon has frozen it out of recent negotiations with the tribesmen.

"Search and Clear"

The apparently bloodless disarming occurred in Darlac province, not far from the provincial capital of Banmethuot.

At first American spokesmen said the Vietnamese marines had been operating against the Viet Cong. But there were stronger indications later that the "search and clear" operation was aimed specifically at Montagnard strike force units whose

loyalty to Saigon was questionable.

There were U.S. Marine advisers with the Vietnamese marine units involved in the operation. It is not known whether U.S. Special Forces personnel were with the tribal formations that laid down their arms, although the Civilian Irregular Defense Group units composed of Montagnards are normally led by American officers.

There have been unconfirmed reports in the past 24 hours that as many as four Americans have been relieved of responsibility in connection with the delicate Montagnard situation.

Americans Leaves

It is known, however, that William Beechner, who had been chief of U.S. Mission activity in Darlac province, recently left the country. One American source denied that Beechner was on the point of being declared persona non grata, but it appeared that his departure coincided with growing governmental suspicion of American relations with the Montagnards.

The Saigon government recently warned Montagnard activists in FULRO--the United Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races -- that unless they rallied to the government they would be met with massive military action.

Both the Saigon administration and the Americans hope the Montagnards can be deflected from going on the war-path again.

The 700,000 Montagnards amount to only 12 per cent of South Viet-Nam's population, but they are in the majority in seven of the 44 mainland provinces and have always claimed

a right of eminent domain to their vast mountain-and-jungle hinterland, which is about one-third of the country's land mass.

Among the Montagnards more extreme demands in the past was recognition of themselves as a separate state with their own national flag and international recognition.

Realistic Demands

Today the Montagnards are believed to be insisting only on adequate representation in provincial governments, their own zone of military operations and increased government support in food and medical supplies--things that Americans believe the government could readily concede.

The Americans insist that in their contacts with the tribesmen they have stated clearly that the Montagnards must discuss their grievances directly with the Vietnamese authorities; that they have neither the desire nor the ability to negotiate bilaterally with the Montagnards, and that in any showdown they must support Saigon.

Lt. Gen. John L. Throckmorton, deputy commander of U.S. forces in Viet-Nam, and Melvin Manfull, first secretary of the U.S. Embassy, went to Banmethuot in early August to make this point to a representative of the dissident tribes.

But for years the Ameri-

cans have had a special military relationship with the Montagnards, particularly in Special Forces help to the formation of anti-infiltration forces.

The Vietnamese traditionally look down on the Montagnards--a separate ethnic group whose culture is less sophisticated--as "minor" or savages. By the latter years of President Ngo Dinh Diem, the Vietnamese were already suspicious of American motives with the tribesmen.

Some Concessions

But after last year's rebellion, then Prime Minister Nguyen Khanh made what some Americans called "water-torched" concessions to the Montagnards. The tribesmen were promised greater recognition of their status, social welfare benefits, and inclusion of their officers in the armed forces.

Legislation covering many of these concessions was approved, but much of it has become a dead letter; it was never put into effect. The U.S. Mission believes the Saigon administration could at least withdraw the fuse from this explosive issue by living up to promises made by its own predecessor.